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# Julian Savulescu and the issue of controversial choices

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### Abstract

Romanian-Australian bioethicist and philosopher, Julian Savulescu is Professor of Applied Ethics at Oxford University and leader of transnational projects concerning ethical implications of cloning regarding embryonic stem cells, “the issue of artificial life and improvement of the human species” through technology. He performed an analysis of the relationship between construction of autonomy and the idea of good life in terms of controversial choices. The controversy is based on the idea of economics and welfare in relationship with yourself and with others. In this paper we analyze some of the implications of Julian Savulescu’s views on contemporary development of bioethics.

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### 1. Introduction

Professor Julian Savulescu is the coordinator of Uehiro Centre of Practical Ethics of the Philosophy Faculty within Oxford University. His most significant methodological contributions [1] consist in bringing an approach originated in analytical philosophy into medical ethics. The philosopher’s favorite research areas are: euthanasia and the decision to give up life, autonomy and informed consent, confidentiality, distributive justice etc. The author introduced the issue of ethics in other fields of knowledge with a trans-disciplinary approach based on ethics, medicine and law. The dominant paradigm of his research is the analytical philosophy. Julian Savulescu [2] performed an analysis of the relationship between construction of autonomy and the idea of good life in terms of controversial choices. The author shows that choices based on individual values different from common ones, are a challenge in general, but particularly in medical ethics, which calls into question the principle of action in the interest of the patient. The controversy is based on the relationship between the construction of the idea of

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autonomy and that of welfare in relation with yourself and with others. Of course, controversial choices are not always expressions of autonomy.

### *1.1. Philosophical premises of understanding the concept of autonomy*

Julian Savulescu [2] distinguishes between the Kantian and the Millian concept of autonomy. From both perspectives the individual should be encouraged to make rational choices to improve the authenticity and quality of life. The author shows that certain choices, although destructive, are sometimes essential for the individual in the construction of his own life and welfare. They are presented a series of controversial choices: sadomasochism, mutilation for apotemnophilia, the right to refuse medical treatments considered useless or degrading etc.

Julian Savulescu [2] presents autonomy in a Kantian sense – as a right of the individual to self-determination. Individual competence to make autonomous decisions is related to being informed, being able to understand information and make assumptions about the consequences of a decision. Insisting on the implications of autonomy in the Kantian sense, Savulescu points out that it is based on the principle of self-determination which is seen as a choice weighed on the possible and predictable paths of action and not just as a simple choice. It is informed choice that allows us to understand the nature and consequences of actions.

### *1.2. The concept of autonomy in Julian Savulescu's view*

Julian Savulescu [3] shows that the decryption of the human genome and identification of genetic bases of diseases, not only opens the way to genetic improvement of the human species by selecting the most viable embryos, but can also lead to deliberate reproduction of human individuals with genetic mutations including people with disabilities. Savulescu [3] gives the example of a deaf lesbian couple who decided to give birth through artificial insemination to a deaf child. In the view of the two, deafness is not a disability, but a definition of a cultural identity based on a particular form of communication. Starting with this example, the ethical implications of genetic fetal testing and genetic diagnosis, in case of in vitro fertilization, are analyzed. As normal families seek to identify and possibly eliminate the risks of a child with disabilities, in the same way, people belonging to genetic minorities may wish to bring children into the world with the same features and who will follow the same lifestyle. Guy Kahane, together with Savulescu [4], proposes redefining disability from a welfare perspective. Disability can be considered a social disadvantage only if in the social distribution process of justice or injustice the society fails to provide to a certain category of users the same level of welfare as other, based on features of that category of people.

### *1.3. Limitations of respect for individuals' autonomy*

Julian Savulescu [2] shows a series of situations that may justify to some extent an infringement of individual autonomy, being in the public interest in order to avoid injury to others, or in achieving distributive justice.

- Distributive justice. Distributive justice requests fair allocation of limited resources. From this perspective, physicians may choose to disconnect a person on artificial ventilation whose chances of survival are minimal or non-existent to use the equipment in saving the life of a person whose chances of survival are higher. Maintaining artificial life (artificial feeding and hydration) of a person may be in the vision of distributive justice correlated with the patient's quality of life creating a motivation for euthanasia.
- Damage done to others. This vision can take several different forms from psychological trauma of the doctor performing euthanasia to the risk of increasing violence by refusing medication, the restriction of freedom of movement of a pregnant woman to avoid damage to the fetus.

- **Public Interest.** The public interest limits the right to self-determination within the freedom of others. In conclusion the author summarizes the concepts of autonomy and emphasizes the relationship between this and risk taking.

#### *1.4. Welfare and autonomy issues in research on human subjects*

Mark Stein and Julian Savulescu [1] explore the relationship between the need to respect an individual's autonomy and his maximum welfare in experiments with human subjects. Authors state that the principle of welfare of individuals should prevail, and it does prevail in practice, regarding their autonomy. They analyzed the two principles and their application in clinical research, focusing on limiting the autonomy and even the role of informed consent to the need to maintain and enhance well-being of the subject. The concept of autonomy is understood by Mark Stein and Julian Savulescu [5] as having as central element the belief according to which individuals should be entitled to self-determination, which is preferable to dependence on another person.

There are two meanings of the term autonomy: the liberal, considered major in bioethics, as reflected in the law, and libertarian as an important alternative to it. The libertarian vision is less radical than the liberal in restriction of legitimate intervention of different actors in the decision of individuals except in violation of the rights of others. The libertarian vision excludes the paternalist intervention in the decisions of an individual for his good [6]. The authors show that the need for informed consent has liberal origins and not libertarian as it focuses on information as a condition of the individual good. The libertarian vision is content to accept the authentic decision of the individual without questioning the level of information and how the choice was made.

## **2. Between Superman and Supermouse or the daylight of biological liberation**

Based on the results of a team of geneticists from Ohio who managed to produce a genetically engineered mouse with outstanding performance in terms of physical strength, after alteration of the genetic sequence that coordinates glucose metabolism, Julian Savulescu analyzes the impact of technologies on the improvement of the genome that become, nowadays, possible for people. Improvement by genetic engineering of human beings is called by Savulescu [7] biological liberation and is understood as overcoming biological and evolutionary constraints of the human species. Natural evolution biologically adapted the human species to a historical period in which food sources were not as abundant and easily accessible as today.

Simple biological difference between *Homo sapiens* and a possible new species resulting from the improvement of *homo sapiens* should not constitute grounds for concern and conservatism of species, but rather an opportunity for moral improvement of humanity [8]. Savulescu [9] made a critical analysis from an ethical point of view of technologies that allow the enhancement of human beings. In this evaluation are presented a series of pros and cons regarding the use of technology to improve the human condition, arguments that lead to the conclusion that it is morally wrong to opt for the non-improvement of the human being. As a diet providing adequate child development is considered beneficial and morally acceptable because it produces children's welfare, likewise the biological intervention is justifiable and is wrong and unethical to give up.

## **3. The principle of procreative beneficence**

The principle of procreative beneficence is seen by Savulescu as a moral obligation for couples who use in vitro insemination [10]. This obligation derives from the duty to give children the best chance possible to have a better life. The principle of procreative beneficence refers mainly to selecting embryos that will generate children with minimal genetic predisposition to disease. The lack of selection or election of an embryo with predisposition to disease raises the question of a deliberate choice of a possible suffering life for the future child. Savulescu [10] shows that the theory of procreative beneficence cannot be considered eugenic practice because it is a private act

of the couple who seeks to provide to the future child the best opportunities in life, while eugenics regard the interference of society in the private life in order to improve the human species [11].

The transformation of *Homo sapiens* into an artificially enhanced human through total suppression of natural selection can provide to the human species a series of threats, including the creation of totally obedient and autonomy-lacking individuals, or on the contrary, to some people completely devoid of fear, feelings of self-preservation, both being “perfect soldiers”. Discrimination against children born naturally as opposed to those selected may be a cause of social inequality. From our perspective, the use of technology for moral enhancement presents an ethical risk to open the way, on one hand, for punitive practices based on medical technology, and on the other hand for eugenics based on improving morals. Whether we speak of an ethic of superman, or a moral of obedience, both options raise issues in support of personal autonomy of the person medically or technologically enhanced.

#### **4. Euthanasia and organ donation**

Dominic Wilkinson together with Julian Savulescu [12] argues that euthanasia accompanied by organ donation is a rational practice superior to simply disconnecting devices that artificially maintain the life of terminal patients. Patients or their families should be given the right to consent on organ donation by euthanasia practices to replace disconnection from the device through various forms of advance directive. The authors refer to the situation in the UK where at least 5,000 patients die annually as a result of a decision to give up the life support machines. In this country legislation allows disconnection from the device and is a frequent medical practice. The authors show that when people disconnect the equipment which maintains life artificially, they are eligible as donors of organs only after brain death. Ethical principles of organ transplantation are taken into discussion: the principle of maximum utility, the principle of non-maleficence, autonomy of the patient, family autonomy, the rule of the deceased donor through brain-death without the risk of killing him. Each of these principles is compatible with euthanasia for organ donation by decoupling from artificial life support devices.

#### **5. Instead of conclusions**

Julian Savulescu re-interrogates the specific of human condition in contemporary society characterized by an unprecedented development of science and technology. Openings made possible by medical technology, especially genetic, by medical assisted human reproduction and not least by synthetic biology, requires a rethinking of horizons of ethical meaning in everyday practices. Savulescu, bringing into question the controversial choices, generated precisely by the principle of autonomy, created the frame for anthropological opening, which places bioethics as the focus of philosophical reflection on the significance of new scientific and social paradigms.

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